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Intersection of gender & education: Experiences and perspectives of highly educated women in Laos

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Laos, a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, is generally considered an under researched context; the majority of data related to gender and education comes from INGOs or international organizations and focuses on gender parity. As the government of Laos works to better the opportunities of women and girls nationwide, gender parity has improved across all levels of education. It is unclear, however, in what ways women's experiences of education have changed, highlighting a need for qualitative data in this area.

In this research, highly educated Lao women were interviewed in order to discover the different ways women conceptualize what it means to be "educated" in the Lao context, their perceptions of how education and gender influence each other, and their journeys to becoming educated. By looking at the stories of women who have achieved academic success, we can build an understanding of some of the catalysts and hindrances impacting educational attainment.

Twelve interviews were conducted over summer 2019 with women in two provinces of Laos, all of whom have graduated from at least one tertiary education program. The data were analyzed using a phenomenographic approach, focusing on the women's conceptions, perceptions, and experiences.

Initial findings highlight the changing nature of gender roles and gendered expectations in Laos, particularly in regards to women's abilities and opportunities in education, careers, and at home. In particular, a shift in women's motivations and attitudes towards education as well as government and international scholarship programs seem to have driven this change. Significantly, there was a clear differentiation between how women viewed gender equality in the cities compared to the rural or 'local' areas. Conflicting ideas emerged of whether equality had been achieved (as evidenced by the women in successful careers and with high educational qualifications) or whether more work needs to be done. Finally, the concept of an 'educated person' involves more than just a degree, diploma, or qualification; rather, an educated person is marked by their mindset and the values they hold.

The findings of this research have potential implications for educational policy and practice throughout Laos at all educational levels, as well as how gender mainstreaming is applied in all spheres.

Keywords: education, gender, development, educatedness, Laos, phenomenography

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Contents

1 Introduction

For the past few decades, Laos has worked alongside international organizations to improve the opportunities of women and to increase the quality of education. These improvements are part of an initiative started by the Lao government in 1996 in order to move out of Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2020 (MPI & UNDP in Lao PDR, 2017, 1; Phetsiriseng, 2009, 266). The United Nations defines LDCs as "low-income countries confronting severe structural impediments to sustainable development" (United Nations, n.d., para. 1). Graduation from LDC status is measured by gross national income, human assets, and economic vulnerability. Education plays an important role, as enrolment and literacy are two main indicators of 'human assets' for graduation from LDC status. As a former colony, Laos faces unique challenges as it works to move out of LDC status.

1.1 Identified Research Gap

Laos is generally an under researched context, with few academic studies (Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011, 42). The majority of information available on women's education in Laos has been quantitative data collected for INGOs or multilateral organizations like the United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These reports most often focus on statistics such as school access. Subrahmanian (2005) emphasizes the need for both quantitative and qualitative data in order to assess gender equality; a focus on gender parity alone is not enough (397). Some research has been done on women's perceptions of gender and educational experiences in Laos, including Christine Fox's (2003) study on gender, ethnicity, and citizenship education. Maxwell, Boulidam, Onsy and Osay (2016) interviewed female academics on their influences in becoming and experiences as academics at a Lao university. Additionally, Berge, Chounlamany, Khounphilaphanh, and Silfver (2017) and Phommachanh and Willsher (2016) interviewed teachers, teacher education students, and beginning teachers about education practices, reflecting the need to hear the voices of women themselves.

Despite these exceptions, the research available on gender equality in Laos is largely focused on the achievement of gender parity in educational enrolment, and not on the actual experiences of those women who have been closing the gap and participating in education. Gender parity is attained when females and males are equally represented in education; it can be described as

"formal" equality, "premised on the notion of the 'sameness' of men and women, where the male actor is held to be the norm" (Subrahmanian, 2005, 397). Across all levels of education, gender parity in Laos is improving in enrolment (UN in Lao PDR, 2015, 46). However, a deeper understanding of *who* is taking part in education, *how* they are participating, and *why* is needed.

Malhotra, Pande, and Grown (2003) argue that "education is a necessary, but not sufficient investment for achieving gender equality or improving women's wellbeing" (1). While participation in higher education can improve women's opportunities, it also has the ability to reinforce or widen already existing gender inequalities (Jayaweera, 1997a, 245). Qualitative research makes it possible to identify what societal factors affect access to education as well as experiences while pursuing education.

This research was in part inspired by a project undertaken at the University of Jyväskylä and funded by the Academy of Finland. This project, entitled 'Educated Girls and Women in Tanzania: Sociocultural interpretations of the meaning of education', studied the experiences and perceptions of Tanzanian women who had reached secondary and higher education ("Educated girls and women", 2017). My advisor, Elina Lehtomäki, led this project, along with Mari-Anne Okkolin, Hanna Posti-Ahokas, and several other collaborators. Okkolin's work, in particular, influenced this thesis, as she studied how women constructed "their educational pathways to the university level" (Okkolin, 2013, 4), as well as *who* made decisions about women's educational experiences and *how* those decisions were made (Okkolin, 2016, 887). Although this project was focused on an entirely different context, the purpose remains the same: to understand how and why women were able to achieve academic success, despite cultural restraints.

1.2 Aims and Research Questions

For this research, I interviewed highly educated Lao women in order to directly hear the experiences of women in education. This research aims to discover the different ways women in Laos conceptualize what it means to be educated, as well as how gender and education influence each other. By looking at the stories of women who have achieved academic success, we can hopefully build an understanding of some of the catalysts and hindrances impacting educational attainment.

The research questions guiding this thesis are:

1. In what ways do Lao women perceive how education and gender influence each other?
2. How do Lao women perceive what it means to be “educated” in Laos?

The intent of this research is not to create generalized claims about the status of education for women in Laos, but rather to inform policy makers and practitioners in order to improve women’s experiences in regards to access to and participation in education. Research into the challenges and work of women has the ability to influence what kind of policies are written (Posti-Ahokas & Okkolin, 2016, 3).

The next chapter will cover the key concepts driving this research, as they are vital to understanding how this thesis was designed and the driving ideas behind it. Chapter 3 introduces the Lao context, looking at the history of Laos as well as the significance of gender and international aid. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology, as well as the ontological and epistemological premises and justifications for the use of phenomenography. Chapters 5 and 6 present my findings, discussion on the findings, and a review of the ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

2 Conceptual Framework

2.1 Link between education and gender equality

Improving access to education for women has been at the global forefront of policy and development projects for decades. Educating girls and women is expected to improve not only their lives, but also to improve the economy of the countries they are in. "Arguments for investing in women's education have been drawn from raising economic efficiency, the social policy benefits of female leadership and women's participation in social governance, and from the analytical evidence showing that both the private and social returns of the years of schooling of females are greater than the returns to schooling of males" (Posti-Ahokas, 2014, 9). Higher education is shown to have the greatest impact on improving social and economic opportunities for women, compared to primary and secondary education (Malhotra, et al., 2003, 24). Furthermore, education is shown to reduce reliance on male income as women are more likely to work, fertility rates are lowered, malnutrition is reduced, political participation increases, and child mortality decreases (Fallon, 1999, 67-68; Patrinos, 2008, 58-59).

Discussions on education for empowerment are fruitless, however, when they do not consider beyond access. Aksornkool (1993) argues that education for empowerment must "view women as society's active members who need education to participate, effectively and meaningfully, in any activity and as equal partners of men" (53). Achieving gender equality in education and other aspects of life requires recognizing the impact gender has on unequal starting points and limitations, and then working with those differences and against those limitations (Subrahmanian, 2005, 397). Gender roles are learned and fortify through the socialization, 'hidden curriculum', and social climate of educational institutions at all levels (Jayaweera, 1997a, 250). Providing education in itself does not greatly improve gender equality due to the strongly engrained societal views on gender roles and stereotypes (Malhotra, et al., 2003, 15). It is critical to note that "[w]hile education may not be an adequate base for empowerment, exclusion from education reinforces powerlessness" (Jayaweera, 1997b, 417). As stated previously, schools have a tendency to reinforce and reproduce traditional stereotypes, so education for empowerment must prepare girls "to assess their worth and envisage new possibilities" (Stromquist, 2003, 24).

Additionally, the social aspects of life, particularly support structures, outside the classroom have an impact on how women succeed in school (Posti-Ahokas, 2014, 53). In many Asian

societies, education has been viewed as a waste of time for women, who are expected to focus on building a family or contributing to household or farm chores (Jayaweera, 1997a, 248). For some, sending women to school creates an opportunity cost for the family as they cannot study and complete housework and childcare tasks (Lincove, 2006, 341). This view of a woman's role as caretaker has become naturalized and "historically legitimized", creating unequal burdens for women (Subrahmanian, 2005, 398). These expected roles and responsibilities can make it difficult for family, and women themselves, to see the value in pursing education.

Education for women has the potential to create change in the societal views of gender and gender roles. Jayaweera (1997a) argues that if higher education intends to improve the economic and social empowerment of women, it must "equip them with capabilities to facilitate access to, and control of, assets and resources, and promote positive self-perceptions, self-confidence, awareness of issues and rights, and the ability and will to achieve them" (258). Education has the ability to change the role of women not only by increasing their ability to participate economically, but also by giving women time and space to challenge social norms and grow their autonomy (Stromquist, 2003, 26).

For this to happen, education must enable girls to "develop knowledge and skills to nullify and counter stereotypes and conceptions of masculinity and femininity that limit the potential of women" (Stromquist, 2003, 24). It must also decrease masculine norms that may be harmful to gender equality and well-being (Stromquist, 2003, 25).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the intersectional issues that affect women differently. Ethnicity, language, and socio-economic status have major impacts on access to education as well as the results of education. Writing on educational access in Asia, Jayaweera (1997b) states, "Class rather than gender has affected the access of the majority of girls in these countries to education" (417). Low income families are less likely to value education for girls, based largely on the afore-mentioned household contributions women provide (Jayaweera, 1997b, 471). This suggests a need for targeted approaches that address multiple barriers to education.

2.2 What it means to be 'educated', or 'educatedness'

It is tempting to reach for a dictionary to define what it means to be 'educated', but any definition would be largely steeped in the researcher's own cultural and educational background. To

be considered ‘educated’ is entirely dependent on culture, context, and time, and finding a culturally/contextually relevant definition is exactly the purpose of this research. It is also possible that what it means to be educated differs across gender, as society typically privileges male education.

Previous research done on this topic reinforces the continually changing nature of the idea of “educatedness” (Pastol, 1994). It is also important to note that being considered educated cannot be “adequately described by listing static qualities which simply need to be maximised” (Pastol, 1994, 33). Furthermore, there are many aspects that can be used to define educatedness, from years of schooling, to personal attributes, to a certain mindset. As education exposes people to new values, their perceptions of what it means to be educated will change (Fallon, 1999, 68-69).

Research done by Ramp and Smith (2004) with the Pii’kani Nation in Canada found strong and conflicting views of education across the community. Through their interviews and questionnaires, they found “the very meaning of education, let alone educational and career aspirations, cannot be defined in isolation from the cultural, social, political and economic contexts in which people live and the ideas about personhood, family and community that they hold” (Ramp & Smith, 2004, 80). Discussions of education were set in the experiences and context of the research participations and could not be separated from them.

It is important for this research to be open to new ideas of the concept of being ‘educated’ and ‘educatedness’. Because it is so context dependent, so I came into this research without a set definition of what it means to be educated, although I am likely influenced by my own personal background—through my own educational experiences and my understanding of education in Laos.

As our interpretations of educatedness are built by our contexts, exposure to new cultures can result in changing views of what it means to be educated. While previous research has shown that study abroad can have impacts on personal development, intercultural sensitivity, and critical thinking (Nam, 2011, 140, 168), it seems self-evident that the more the student’s home environment differs from the study abroad environment, the more internal change may occur. For example, a Lao student studying in Finland may be forced to confront their values more so than a Lao student studying in Thailand, a country with a much more similar culture.

In a study of East Asian students in the UK, Durkin (2008) found that students had to adapt to new classroom cultures where debate was a normal and expected part of the learning process (3). East Asian cultures are typically confrontation avoidant, placing great value on harmony and respect; challenging and questioning teachers would conflict with the environments they had grown up with (Durkin, 2008, 3). In a similar study, Fakunle, Allison, and Fordyce (2016) observed that Chinese students studying in the UK struggled to adapt to the Western style of "critical argumentation" (30).

In these new environments, students found they had to learn and utilize critical thinking (Fakunle, Allison, & Fordyce, 2016, 34). Similarly, a study of Lao doctoral students in Sweden found that the students needed to learn to work independently (Silfver & Berge, 2016, 581). Durkin (2008) described this type of adaptation as the development of a 'Middle Way' that "synchronizes culturally accepted elements from both their own and Western Culture" (11-12).

This transition to a new learning environment can also result in students questioning the value of their previous educational experiences. In their previously mentioned study, Silfver and Berge (2016) found that many students feared they were coming into the program with a lower quality of knowledge compared to their peers, due to master's programs that did not prepare them for the rigor of the Swedish system (579).

This indicates that study abroad does not completely overwrite the educational values and practices of students, but rather results in new views of education and the world that are a negotiation between their home and study abroad culture. It seems clear, then, that study abroad may alter views of what it means to be educated.

3 Contextual Framework

An understanding of the context of this research is critical, as it shapes both the experiences and perceptions of participants, as well as my own interpretations. The colonial history of Laos, as well as the role of international aid, have important implications for how education in Laos has developed to its modern form. This section will provide a brief, and likely incomplete, introduction to Laos, Lao education in the past and present, gender's place in Lao society, and the more recent history of aid in Laos.

3.1 The Lao People's Democratic Republic, briefly

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (known also as Lao PDR and Laos) is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, bordered by Thailand, Myanmar, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Much of the western border with Thailand follows the Mekong River. Most large towns and cities are situated along the banks of the Mekong, as the majority of the country is forested and sparsely populated. As of 2020, the population of Laos was 7,447,396, with the largest city being the capital of Vientiane, home to 683,000 people (The World Factbook, n.d.) The country has a young population, with a median age of 24 (The World Factbook, n.d.).

Laos includes 49 officially recognized ethnic groups, although roughly 200 ethnic groups reside in Laos (The World Factbook, n.d.). Lao is the official language of government and education, but there are an estimated 82 languages spoken, with approximately 50% of Lao children speaking something other than Lao as their first language (Kosonen, 2005b, 3).

For six centuries, Laos was a monarchy, even while under French colonial rule. In the 1940's, colonialism in Laos officially ended, returning control to the Royal Lao Government (Bäcktorp, 2007). Over the next two decades, the Royal Lao government (RLG), backed by the United States, engaged in a civil war against the Pathet Lao, a communist group supported by the North Vietnamese. In 1975, the Pathet Lao took power, installing a one-party socialist state. (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, 35; the World Factbook, n.d.). In 1986, the government implemented the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in order to become more market-oriented (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, 21). The goal of the NEM was to increase economic development (Ogawa, 2009, 283; Souriyavongsa, Chatouphonexay, & Phongnathy, 2019, 80). This was accompanied by the adoption of *chintanakane mai* (often translated as new thinking, but referring to the liberalization of the economy and the changing society), and increasing support from the United

Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (Hartley, 2015, 15; Hutt, 2020, para. 5; Phraxayavong, 2009, xvi, 134).

The country has only recently experienced sustained economic growth, largely due to natural resources and manufacturing (Hayden, 2019, 20). The majority of the population remains below the poverty line, with much of the country's wealth centered in Vientiane.

3.2 Education in Laos: Historically

For centuries, Buddhist temples were the main source of formal education in Laos, although they were only open to boys (Bäcktorp, 2007, 48; Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, 27; Dorner & Gorman, 2011, para. 28). Informal education was more common for families and those in villages, teaching life skills (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, 27; Souriyavongsa et al., 2019, 78). Bounyasone and Keosada (2011) argue that informal education remains significant today due to the "failure of the modern state to integrate marginalised social groups" (28).

While a part of French Indochina, the French introduced primary and secondary education based on the French system, using the French language (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, 30). Even after the end of colonization, secondary education in areas controlled by the RLG remained in French, and education was not "fully 'decolonized' until the Communist takeover, despite efforts at linguistic 'Laoicization'" (Lockhart, 2001, 13). At this time, almost all government leaders studied in the French system, with some even going to France for secondary school or university, including both the last king and the first president of Laos (Halpern & Tinsman, 1966, 500).

Education policy during colonization was largely based on the view of the Lao "as a rather childlike people from whom little was to be expected and who needed to be protected from their more aggressive Siamese and Vietnamese neighbors" (Lockhart, 2001, 5). Education was mainly provided to those who would serve as administrators for the government, typically aristocratic Lao (Bäcktorp, 2007, 49-50). Those who were not ethnically Lao "remained virtually outside the educational process" (Langer, 1971, 3-4). Historically, education—particularly higher education—has only been available to the elite (royal in the past, and social/economic in the present) (Bäcktorp, 2007, 25; Halpern & Tinsman, 1966, 500).

During the war, education differed greatly between areas controlled by the Pathet Lao and areas controlled by the RLG (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, 32). The Pathet Lao focused on adult

education, literacy, and the spread of revolutionary ideology (Creak, 2018, 763; Langer, 1971, 23-24). After taking power, they attempted to increase literacy and access to education, as education was seen as a way to spread party rhetoric (Bäcktorp, 2007, 47-48; Creak, 2018, 762, 767). This resulted in increased access to education, but quality was low, as teachers and members of the educated population fled the country in the early years of the communist regime (Bäcktorp, 2007, 47; Creak, 2018, 762). Many skilled and educated members of society were "incarcerated in prisons, were confined to labor camps, or fled the country" (Phraxayavong, 2009, 130). Education was used a tool to support the growth of the newly formed Lao People's Democratic Republic at the end of war. Government statistics recorded an increase in enrolment, the number of schools, and the size of teaching staff within the first decade (Lockhart, 2001, 25-26).

Increased education also had the potential to increase economic competitiveness. From the mid-1970s to 1990, many were sent abroad for higher education, particularly in Eastern Europe, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union (Bäcktorp, 2007, 50; Siharath, 2009, 2). With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption of the NEM, the Lao government undertook major changes to education (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, 38-39). Education reform became linked to socio-economic improvement, giving higher priority to improving the education system (Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011, 20; Souriyavongsa et al., 2019, 80-81).

Education is a critical part of efforts by the Lao government to graduate out of LDC status. While Laos is not expected to meet the original goal of 2020, it will most likely graduate from LDC status by 2024 (Vilavong & Rasphone, 2020, para. 3). Education in Laos is viewed as a way "to develop human resources in the country" and "to meet the needs of the country's socio-economic development" (Siharath, 2009, 2). In 1995, the National University of Laos (NUOL) was formed from the unification of six existing educational institutions in order to "harmonize and rationalize Laos' higher education system" (Ogawa, 2009, 285). In reality, the establishment of a national university was intended to increase the economic competitiveness of Lao graduates (Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011, 37).

In the last two decades, there has been a trend towards decentralizing education (Phetsiriseng, 2009, 275). For example, the Prime Minister granted more fiscal management responsibility to the provinces in 2000 (Phetsiriseng, 2009, 276). This presents some challenges, due to the lack

of data to inform provincial or district decision making, poor staff capacity, insufficient resources, and unclear functions and guidelines for planning, budgeting, and management (Phetsiriseng, 2009, 276).

3.3 Education in Laos: Today

The Lao government offers free and compulsory education from ages 6 to 14, or primary to lower secondary, although students may continue to grade 12 (Education Policy Data Center [EPDC], 2018; UN in Lao PDR, 2015, 42; UNESCO, 2014, 8). Students then have the option to study in a technical or vocational school, or at the university level. The structure of the Lao education system is outlined in Appendix 1. According to the 2000 Education Law, the basic purpose of education in Laos is the training of good citizens (Sisavanh, 2003, 4).

Both net enrollment rate and gross enrolment ratio have increased in the 2010's, especially at the primary level (UNESCO, n.d.). Additionally, the Basic Education Quality and Access in Laos program (BEQUAL) highlights that education in Laos "has made substantial progress over the past twenty years" (BEQUAL, 2018, 10). As of 2015, approximately 84.8% of the population is literate (79.39% women) (UNESCO, n.d.). The younger population has a higher literacy rate, 92.5% for those aged 15-24.

Despite the increase in enrolment, there are high levels of dropout following primary education (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2013, 55; UN in Lao PDR, 2015, 40). Additionally, while gender parity is increasing across all levels of education, the fastest growth has been in tertiary education, with female enrollment surpassing male enrolment for the first time in 2017 (UNESCO, n.d.). Female enrolment in tertiary education has increased over the past few decades, with a slight dip a few years after the NEM. In 1988, 36.7% of tertiary education students were female, 29.76% in 1998, 43.22% in 2008, and finally 50.58% in 2017 (The World Bank, n.d.). Data on women's enrolment in tertiary education are featured in Figure 1.

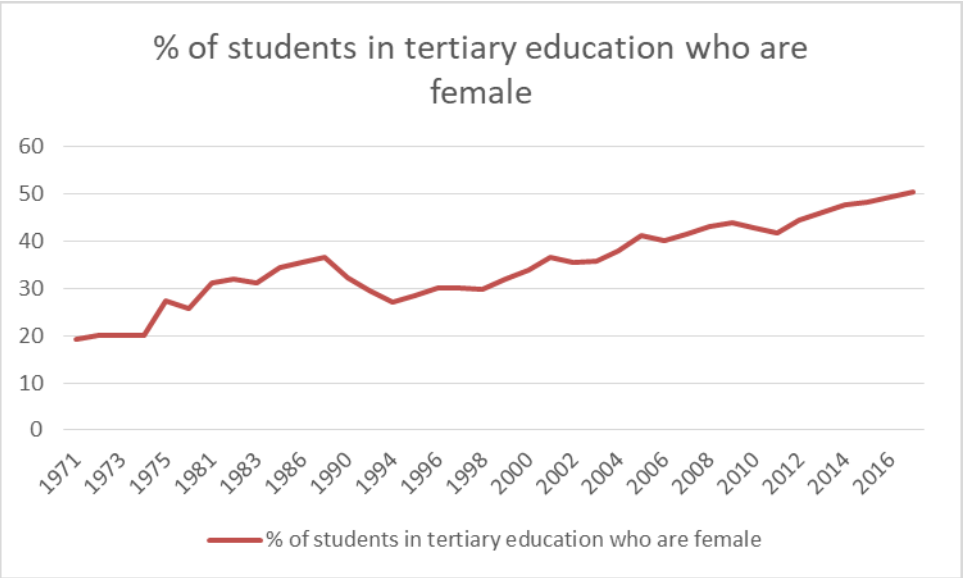

Figure 1. Percentage of students in tertiary education who are female. Data retrieved from the World Bank.

While this growth is positive, enrolment in tertiary education is low overall in Laos (under 20%) and data indicate women are still less likely to graduate than men (UNESCO, n.d.). Additionally, it is important to note that "young women who make it to tertiary level are likely to come from families where gender is less of a barrier" (UN in Lao PDR, 2015, 46).

Although everyone in Laos has the right to education, not all children truly have access (Bäcktorp, 2007, 26-27). All education is conducted in the Lao language, and local languages are not used officially (Kosonen, 2005a, 100; 2005b, 4-5). As stated before, there are an estimated 82 languages spoken in the country; this limits the ability of ethnic minority children, who often do not speak Lao, to participate and learn in the classroom (Sisavanh, 2003, 5; UN in Lao PDR, 2015, 41). Furthermore, most of these children come from rural areas where access to education is already limited.

BEQUAL (2018) identified factors that influence educational attainment; these include the need to care for siblings and to complete household labor (for girls) and farm labor and lack of resources to send children to schools (for boys and girls, both) (7). These findings are consistent with previous reports from the last few decades, as well. A 1989 document prepared by the Lao Women's Union identified that girls were given "lower priority" than boys in education, due to traditional exclusion of girls from pagoda schools, the need for girls to complete household chores, and for family competition for resources favoring male children (National Union of Lao Women, 1989, 10). Additionally, a 1998 report for UNESCO identified these same barriers to

access, as well as concerns for safety walking to school, low value placed on education, and expectations for marriage and motherhood (Peters, 1998, 4). More recent studies indicate additional factors preventing girls from attending school: fear for safety, cost of school, lack of interest, fewer market opportunities after education, and distance to school (King & van de Walle, 2007, 43-45; UN in Lao PDR, 2015, 46).

In regards to higher education, Laos has four public universities (National University of Laos in Vientiane, Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang, Savannakhet University, and University of Champasak), 23 vocational schools, and 69 private institutions (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). These numbers vary across different sources, with the UN reporting 22 public higher education institutions and 77 private in 2014 (Chapman & Chien, 2014, 23). Tuition fees are capped to avoid limiting who can attend university, but most students are typically from wealthier families (Hayden, 2019, 21). Admission is also influenced by the concept of *nayobay*. Through *nayobay*, certain people are given priority access to education and positions, for example the children of teachers, national heroes, and political leaders (Bounyasone & Keosada, 2011, 23-24; Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011, 73). This system is deeply engrained in Lao society and built on the foundations of hierarchy and respect; "if you have served the government for a long period of time there is at least a reassurance that the system will take care of you and your family" (Bäcktorp, 2007, 112). The Ministry of Education and Sports began limiting the use of *nayobay* in admissions practices in 2004, although it still exists to a certain extent, both formally and informally (Bäcktorp, 2007, 111).

There are questions of quality of university staff, as few have master's qualifications, and less than five percent have a doctorate (Hayden, 2019, 21; The ASEAN Secretariat, 2013, 56; Siharath, 2009, 10). In fact, it is common for students pursing higher education, especially doctorates, to "go abroad, even if no further than over the border to Thailand" (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2013, 56). Other popular destinations for higher education include Vietnam, Japan, Australia, and France (Chapman & Chien, 2014, 155).

According to 2011 MICS data, post-secondary attainment was much more likely for those in the capital of Vientiane compared to any other province, and those in urban areas are six times more likely to complete post-secondary education than those in rural areas (EPDC, 2018). Women aged 15-49 in the richest quintile had a much higher rate of post-secondary attainment compared to those in the second richest quintile (30.3% vs. 8.7%) and far higher than the poorest quintile (0.2%). Across all quintiles, however, men are more educated than women.

A final, significant aspect of Lao education is the continued use of rote memorization in classrooms (Bäcktorp, 2007, 49-50; Chounlamany, 2014, para. 9; Fox, 2003, 406). While government policies have pushed for more student-centered instruction for over a decade, the reality of most classrooms is still very teacher centered (Bäcktorp, 2007, 54-55). This style of teaching is often seen as a reflection of Lao's hierarchical society, with great emphasis put on respect for elders.

3.4 Gender in Laos

As a socialist and communist state, the government officially calls for gender equality and for women to participate in the workforce (Bäcktorp, 2007, 51). The 1991 constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, stating, "Lao citizens of both sexes shall enjoy equal rights in political, economic, cultural, social, and family affairs" (as cited in The World Bank & Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2012, 51). During the Civil War, women were active members of the revolutionary movement, and education in areas occupied by the Pathet Lao promoted the role of women in education, even training a larger number of female teachers than in territory occupied by the RLG (Langer, 1971, 20-21; National Union of Lao Women, 1989, 4-5). In present day, party leadership is still largely run by men (The World Bank & ADB, 2012, 51). Although there is an increasing number of women in leadership positions and in the civil service, it can be difficult for them to advance due to work and familial responsibilities conflicting, and "also because of more subtle barriers to participation present in traditionally male-dominated political networks" (The World Bank & ADB, 2012, 53).

The Lao Women's Union (LWU), one of the country's four official mass organizations, is seen as the center of gender equality promotion in Laos (Faming, 2018, 124; The World Bank & ADB, 2012, 53). The LWU "serves as a bridge between the People's Revolutionary Party, the government, and Lao women from urban and rural areas" (The World Bank & ADB, 2012, 53). The LWU also serves to educate village women on the communist party and promotes women's development programs (The World Bank & ADB, 2012, 53-54; Tinker, 2015, 146). According to the LWU, women are expected to complete three good deeds ("Good Citizen, Good Development, and Building Good and Prosperous Families") and two duties ("Defend and Develop the Nation") (Faming, 2018, 125). This presents a contradiction of encouraging women's development while asking them to maintain traditional, reproductive roles. (Faming, 2018, 125; Fox, 2003, 406).

Since the NEM, many aid projects and programs have begun in Laos, and many include gender equality as a pillar of development. The government of Laos, in partnership with aid organizations, is working to enhance quality of life for women in Laos, but these efforts require increased budgets and improved capacity for further success (UN in Lao PDR, 2015, 49). According to Chounlamany (2014), "The process of introducing gender issues into education is closely connected with imported Western models on gender mainstreaming disseminated through donor projects" (para.14). Policy-borrowing such as this is often critiqued, as it can be difficult, and potentially harmful, to integrate Western ideas into non-Western contexts. Overall, however, it is important to recognize that "[s]ignficant advances have been made in gender-focused policy and legislation over the past five years" (UN in Lao PDR, 2015, 49). This is evidenced by the increasing number of women participating in education and in economic and political life.

Bäcktorp (2007) notes that the *nayobay* system is used as a tool of gender mainstreaming (188). In this way, some view *nayobay* as a form of 'affirmative action', promoting the inclusion of women and minorities. In reality, these spots were often offered to the family members of those already a part of the system, i.e. women of higher social position. This practice could potentially skew reporting, as it would represent the promotion of women as a result of gender mainstreaming practices rather than of deep-seated social structures.

Despite any progress that has been made towards gender equity and equality, there are still major differences in the opportunities available to women based on their ethnicity, economic background, and location (BEQUAL, 2018, 7; Fox, 2003, 406). This is evidenced by interviews completed by Bäcktorp (2007, 125-126) and Faming (2018, 121). According to their research, unequal gender divisions are often viewed as a rural problem, with gender equality seen as achieved in urban areas. Bäcktorp's (2007) interviews note, however, that even in urban areas there is not equality in family life (127). Throughout the country, there are "entrenched stereotypical attitudes toward women and girls in the family, school, and society which sustain traditional gender roles" (BEQUAL, 2018, 9).

3.5 Aid in Laos

Aid is often directly linked to requirements and restrictions set by donors (Dahlström & Nyambe, 2014, 86). Laos is no exception to this. Laos has been "acutely dependent on foreign

assistance for over half a century because of her historical, geopolitical, and geographical situation" (Phraxayavong, 2009, 1). Phraxayavong (2009) goes on to argue that aid was often given with the intention of promoting certain policies or influencing politics (3).

Aid to Laos, in its most commonly understood sense, has been identified as starting in the 1950s, with the US government providing aid to the RLG, with the goal of fighting the spread of communism (Phraxayavong, 2009, 45). Since then, Khennavong (2014) has identified three stages of Official Development Assistance (11-12). The first stage, beginning in 1975, was characterized by aid coming in from Russia and the Eastern Block, with the government remaining in control. The second stage began with the NEM and a dramatic increase in official aid from the World Bank, ADB, and other Western donors (Chounlamany & Khounphilaphanh, 2011, 35; Khennavong, 2014, 12). Finally, the millennium brought an increase then fall in aid.

Since the 90's, development aid worldwide has given more attention to gender issues (Grown, Addison & Tarp, 2016, 311-312). Previously, aid focused on providing money and implementing programs specifically for women and girls, but a two-track approach is more common now, combining direct investments with the mainstreaming of gender issues (Grown, Addison, & Tarp, 2016, 312). Aid in Laos has followed this trend as well, as increasing women's participation has been a condition of aid, for example with European Union assistance in the early 2000s (Phraxayavong, 2009, 227; Peters, 1998, 12). Globally, gender mainstreaming has not always been successful, as it "was disseminated to local contexts through government initiatives that were often donor driven" (Silfver, 2010, 483).

Finally, a large number of aid programs in Laos focus on education. Many projects called for a move away from the strong centralized education system as well as the replacement of teacher-centered learning and rote memorization as the main tools of education (Chounlamany, 2014, para. 3). Of particular note is the influence of aid in higher education. The development of all four Lao universities was dependent on funding and aid from outside partners, including the World Bank, the ADB, and the governments of Korea and China (Bourdet, 2001, 15; Phraxayavong, 2009, 243; Sharma, 2016, para. 1). A critique of education development, however, is that the import and export of education risks ignoring the local context, and therefore decreasing education quality (Berge, Chounlamany, Khounphilaphanh, & Silfver, 2017, 103).

4 Methodology

4.1 Phenomenography as an approach

This study uses a phenomenographic approach, as the research interest is on conceptions and perceptions, and phenomenography is an introspective method that looks at the different ways people "experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various kinds of phenomena" (Richardson, 1999, 53). Phenomenography was first used by Ference Marton at the University of Göteborg, Sweden in 1975, although it was not termed 'phenomenography' until later (Richardson, 1999, 53). While similarly named, phenomenography did not emerge from phenomenology, and there are some distinct and significant differences between the two methodologies (Uljens, 1993, 135). Phenomenology looks at the *essence* of a phenomenon, while phenomenography studies the different ways of *understanding* the phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007, 63). As a researcher, I was attracted to phenomenography as I was interested in the experiences and conceptions of the people experiencing these phenomena, rather than in understanding gender and education as phenomena themselves.

When looking at these conceptions, the researcher attempts to identify categorizations of ideas (Richardson, 1999, 70). In phenomenography, "each phenomenon, concept, or principle can be understood in a limited number of qualitatively different ways" (Marton, 1988, 142). It requires making sense of "people's ideas about the world (or about their experience of it)" (Marton, 1981, 178). Because it examines how people discuss their perceptions and experiences, phenomenography is considered to study a second order perspective as opposed to first order perspective (Marton, 1981, 178; Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012, 99). First order perspectives describe aspects of a phenomenon, as is done in phenomenology (Larsson & Holmström, 2007, 56; Marton, 1981, 177).

These conceptions cannot be considered as only a part of each individual interview, but must be considered in relation to the larger data set (Sin, 2010, 315). Marton (1988) describes this as looking at each statement in relation to the larger "pool of meanings" created by the entire data set (154). Ideally, these lessons and categorizations emerge from the data (Richardson, 1999, 70), although it is important to note that researchers have a habit of reproducing previously held ideas (Webb, 1997, 200-201). Reflexivity is a key aspect of phenomenographic research, as it can mitigate the influence of the researchers' beliefs and biases on analysis. Reflexivity is self-

reflection throughout the research process by the researcher. It allows for auditing of the research as it goes on, and improves the rigor of interviews (Smith, 1999, 363). In my own research, I practiced reflexivity by filling out an interview summary form (see Appendix 4) as soon as possible after interviews, and by keeping a journal throughout the interview and analysis stages. Through this practice, I was able to question how my own beliefs impacted my interview style and my analysis of the data.

Finally, it is important to note that this study, and phenomenography generally, do not search for generalizable lessons. Phenomenography does not attempt to study how things actually are, but how they are perceived; there is not just one truth (Marton, 1988, 145; Svensson, 1994, 12). Reality is viewed through the constructivist paradigm, meaning reality is built through interpretation and social exchange; "truth is the result of perspective" (Schwandt, 1994, 236). (The ideas of truth and reality in phenomenography will be discussed further in the following section). Because of this, phenomenography can be beneficial in its ability to learn lessons applicable in other situations, but it is not meant to produce 'textbook' answers or explanations. As the participants' responses are influenced by their society, it is extremely important to consider the context of the study, which is why this thesis dedicates a significant number of pages to the contextual framework (Sin, 2010, 309). Phenomenography seemed particularly appropriate for this research, as the intent was not to find objective definitions of reality, but rather to see how women understood their experiences.

4.2 Ontological and epistemological premises

As phenomenography is quite new, the methodology emerged before the epistemological and ontological assumptions could be clearly developed (Åkerlind, 2005, 321; Richardson, 1999, 57). Now, phenomenography is understood within a non-dualistic ontology (Åkerlind, 2005, 322; Uljens, 1993, 139). Non-dualistic ontology is in direct opposition to representational theories of ontology, which proposes two worlds: one that is of "events and objects" and another that is "a mind or a mental world" (Uljens, 1993, 140). Rather, Uljens (1993) describes reality as existing "through the way in which a person conceives it" (140).

In this sense, it is impossible to establish an 'absolute truth', as new conceptions (and new people to form conceptions) are constantly emerging (Uljens, 1993, 140). Furthermore, conceptions—and therefore truth—change over time as experiences are context-dependent

(Åkerlind, 2005, 331). By taking this ontological stance, the need for phenomenographic research becomes clear, as the world only exists as it is experienced (Uljens, 1993, 140).

This ontological positioning ties directly to the epistemological basis of phenomenography: constructivism. There is not just one reality, but rather meaning is created through social interactions and is structured by the surrounding society (Marton, 1981, 180; Schwandt, 1998, 240). Constructivists recognize "that though each person interprets the events he or she encounters in a somewhat distinct manner, he or she is likely, at the same time, to bring to bear the understandings held by peers, family, friends, coreligionists, or members of other groups to which he or she belongs" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, 29). As a researcher, this positioning emphasizes the significance of context in the understanding of participants' experiences and conceptions.

Because of these ontological and epistemological premises, combined with the subject matter, I chose to approach this thesis from a feminist perspective, underscoring the importance of context and of women's experiences in this research.

4.3 Feminist approach

When considering social science research, historically women's experiences often were not discussed (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, 778; Schwandt, 1998, 241). Knowledge was produced and accessed by men, resulting in incomplete or totally absent representations of women (Harding, 1987, 3; Letherby, 2003, 38-39). Feminist research emerged as a response to this and as a rejection of positivism (Haig, 1997, 180). While feminist research discourse may be full of contradicting definitions and claims, it is largely agreed that there is not one distinct feminist methodology (Haig, 1997, 180; Olesen, 2000, 216; Waller, 2005, F4H20). Rather, feminist research is defined more by the values of the researcher and how those values are present within the research.

Feminist research attempts to include women's perspectives to provide a more holistic view of humanity, which recognizes women's experiences as legitimate knowledge sources (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, 775; Preissle, 2007, 522). Lather (1991) states, "Very simply, to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one's inquiry" (71). It is concerned with the issues of gender, and is committed to "describing, explaining, and otherwise interpreting the female world" (Haig, 1997, 180).

This thesis is framed within feminist research, as it considers the experiences and perceptions of women. Through this consideration, feminist social science recognizes the value of the life stories, histories and experiences of women, which allows us to further understand them and the world (Harding, 1987, 8; Waller, 2005, F4H-21). By looking at their stories, we can see into a previously unstudied part of society. Feminist research, including this thesis, hopes that the knowledge presented will help in the ending of gender inequality (Lather, 1991, 71; Letherby, 2004, 4). A key aspect of feminist research is the integration of an ethics of care throughout the research process. Any feminist research "must reflect an ethic of respect, collaboration, and caring" (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, 775). The relationship of researcher and research participant needs to be based on ethics (Waller, 2005, F4H-21). Letherby (2003) argues that feminist methodology is used not to describe a specific set of tools in conducting research, but rather an approach that puts respect at the center of the research process (5).

Reflexivity is another defining element of feminist research. The views and positions of the researcher impact the interpretation of all research, so it is important to recognize the positioning of the researcher throughout the entire process (Harding, 1987, 9; Letherby, 2003, 9). Furthermore, feminist research has been critiqued by postcolonial feminists, as it risks creating an idea of one 'universal woman', or of objectifying and simplifying Third World women (Rajan & Park, 2005, 54, 57). Rajan and Park (2005) call for feminists to "enter the hard work of uncovering and contesting global power relations, economic, military, and cultural-hegemonic" (54). As a researcher coming from a developed context into a developing context, it was incredibly important for me to be aware of these risks, and to actively avoid essentializing my participants or projecting my own ideas onto them. It was critical that I considered the impact of history and power relations on education and gender in Laos, as well as how my own positioning might influence my research process and my interpretations, which I will discuss in the following section.

4.4 Position of the researcher

Identifying my position as a researcher is significant for a number of reasons, both outlined above and personal. In his critique of phenomenography, Webb (1997) points out that researchers must find their "prejudices…as they construct and interpret categories of understanding" (200). Some argue that phenomenographers must eliminate bias through 'bracketing', or setting aside your own assumptions as much as possible (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, 297). I believe

complete objectivity is impossible, and I do not find it helpful to pretend I can distance myself from my research in this way. Rather, I attempt to confront my own background and consider how it influences my responses.

In considering my relationship to this research, I am forced to reflect on several aspects. First, my academic interest in Laos developed after spending two years living and working in Vientiane. Based on my experiences, I began with the view that gender inequality was present, making research of this kind a necessity. This belief was something I was forced to question throughout the research process, as I came to realize that this view was not universally held.

Furthermore, my personal history in Laos meant that I had some understanding of what life there is like. In some ways, this was a positive, as I began with an idea of what kinds of questions to ask and how to conduct interviews in a culturally appropriate way. Despite my background knowledge, I still came into the interviews feeling a sense of 'imposter syndrome'. As an outsider, I am aware I can never fully understand the experiences of Lao women, and I questioned whether I had the ability to faithfully interpret their words. This, combined with the high amount of respect I felt towards my participants, made me eager to hear their experiences and opinions.

As mentioned several times throughout this thesis, reflexivity was a central part of my research process. It helped me to better understand my own biases, as well as to make stronger, justifiable interpretations of my data. In later sections of this thesis, I go into further explanation of my positioning as an outsider, as well as attempt to defend the reliability and validity of this research.

4.5 Materials and methods

Data were collected through twelve semi-structured interviews conducted in Laos. Interviews were chosen as they give "access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experiences of people" (Seidman, 1991, 1). Individual interviews are the most common form of data collection in phenomenography (Marton, 1997, 99).

The interviews were based around the following topics: participant's educational background; conceptions of what it means to be educated; gender roles in Laos; and the connection between educatedness and gender. Each interview ended by asking the participant if they thought there

was any question I should have asked, or any topic that I may not have known to bring up, as I was an outsider to Lao education. The interview guide is included in Appendix 2.

4.5.1 Participants

Data collection comprised of interviews with twelve participants. Beginning the research resulted in a bit of a paradox, as it required some initial idea of what it means to be 'highly educated'. Research participants were selected based on the researcher's perception of the woman as highly educated, or based on recommendations on reaching out to a woman considered by others to be highly educated.

Because the definition of 'educated' is intentionally left unclear, the only criteria was that the participants have received certification through a tertiary education program. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, this project was influenced heavily by the project 'Educated Girls and Women in Tanzania', where participants were selected based on the fact they had reached higher education, while most women in Tanzania do not. Some participants had been acquaintances of the researcher, but most were contacted through the snowball technique and were either friends of friends, or friends of other participants.

The research participants were all ethnically Lao women who had studied their primary and secondary education in Laos. Two participants completed higher education solely outside of Laos, while the rest studied at least their first degree in Laos. Ten of the participants had studied abroad in some form, whether for an exchange, short program, degree, or language program. One of the participants who did not study overseas had traveled extensively and worked in an international field. Only one participant seemed to have minimal experience outside of Laos. The women ranged from their 20s to their 50s, and all have stable careers. Participants are listed in Appendix 3, using pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

4.5.2 Interviews & Data Collection

Before any interviews were completed for the research, a pilot interview was conducted with a classmate from a different ASEAN country. Although not from Laos, she was able to give insight on what topics might be difficult to discuss and questions previously not considered.

Interviews were all completed in Laos, either at the participant's place of work or in cafes. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in English. Semi-structured interviews follow

a guideline of the same topics for each interview, but the "interviewers' sequencing of questions is participant-led" (Roulston & Choi, 2018, 233). In phenomenography, interviews typically utilize open-ended questions; interviews should be flexible and open to change, but address the same themes (Marton, 1988, 153; Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012, 102).

Before going to Laos in May 2019, I reached out to participants over e-mail to ask if they were interested in taking part in an interview. I explained the purpose of my research and, when requested, sent the list of guiding interview questions. Each interview began with a reminder that participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, giving participants the option to withdraw at any time. We also discussed the purpose of the research, and I emphasized that I was not looking for any particular answers about education and gender in Laos, but rather that I wanted to understand their experiences and perceptions. This was followed with factual questions on their educational backgrounds, before moving into deeper questions on gender and educatedness. In each interview, I attempted to cover every question and topic, either by asking directly about it or by allowing it to be brought up naturally by the participants. Interview structure was influenced by Willis (2006) and Seidman (1991). Willis (2006) suggests avoiding beginning with difficult, probing questions that could cause discomfort (149). Seidman (1991) outlines an interview sequencing that first focuses on contextualizing experiences, then allows time for participants to reflect on these experiences (10-12).

In some interviews, I struggled as the opinions of my participants conflicted with my own values, particularly on the status and meaning of gender equality. I tried to remain unbiased in my questioning and interpretations, however, and adjusted questions that may have lead participants to give an answer I expected, rather than their own views. Additionally, I used this as an opportunity to challenge my own beliefs and to question how they had formed, allowing me to reflect on my analysis process and my interpretation of the data. Most notably, I was surprised to hear participants that thought there was too much focus on gender in modern day Laos. I had not expected to hear any participant argue that, and it led me to reevaluate my own positioning and what expectations I had been subconsciously holding on to.

Language also may have been an issue for some participants. Although I would describe all the participants as proficient in English, I believe that the topics were sometimes difficult to discuss in a second language. I tried to give participants time to reflect on the questions, and to ensure they understood there was no rush to answer. I also asked clarifying questions when language was unclear.

Immediately after each interview, I followed the advice of Rubin and Rubin (2005) and reflected on each interview to see if questions were leading or if my interview technique was too stressful (31-32). I completed an interview summary form, taking notes on the mains issues and themes of the interview, as well as questions or topics that may be relevant for my next interview. This form is included in Appendix 4. This reflective practice meant not only that I brought up new topics to later participants, but also that my interview style and phrasing of questions changed slightly from interview to interview as I found better ways to approach topics and new questions to ask.

When interviews were finished, they were transcribed word for word, including non-verbal communication. Interviews were sent back to the participants to allow them to review and make changes. No participant opted to withdraw or alter the transcriptions.

My interviews were conducted following the principles of feminist research. It was important to me to ensure that the research was ethical, respectful and caring, and that the research participants felt comfortable (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, 785-786). This is why reflexivity and ensuring my participants felt comfortable and understood were such key parts of my interview process.

4.5.3 Analysis Process

Phenomenography does not have one specific, defined form of analysis (Marton, 1988, 153). Analysis begins with looking for units of description, and then looking for the structural relationships and qualitative differences between these (Åkerlind, 2005, 324; Marton & Pong, 2005, 335). Across phenomenographic research, units of description have also been referred to as: ways of conceptualizing, ways of experiencing, ways of seeing, ways of apprehending, ways of understanding, and categories of description (Åkerlind, 2005, 322; Marton & Pong, 2005, 335-336)

The conceptions should emerge from the data; “analysis is, however, not a measurement but a discovery procedure” (Marton, 1997, 100). Once these categories are found, analysis continues in an iterative manner: reapplying the categories to the data, continuing to synthesize into fewer and fewer categories, and identifying relationships between categories (Marton, 1997, 100). Reducing the participants’ experiences and conceptions into categories is not intended to present an all-encompassing representation, but rather to preserve the main content and identify

the relationships between conceptions (Svensson, 1994, 17). Analysis requires looking at the similarities and differences between conceptions and categories, in order to find the variations in experiences (Marton, 1997, 100; Svensson, 1994, 17; Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012, 97). In my own research, I compared the experiences and conceptions of the participants to identify recurrent themes and differences between interviews. I identified the different topics they brought up, as well as their various attitudes towards those topics or ideas.

The data must be looked at in relation to its own interview and within the entire data set (Marton, 1988, 154; Åkerlind, 2005, 323). Yates, Partridge, and Bruce (2012) describe it as looking for "meaning or variation in meaning across interview transcripts, and the structural relationships between these meanings" (104). Once identified, these conceptions are placed into an "outcome space" to represent their relationships to each other. In the outcome space, findings are reported in a way that "describes the categories of qualitatively different conceptions of the phenomenon" (Sin, 2010, 315). Categories within the outcome space should be distinct and different, with clearly explained relationships (Sin, 2010, 315). The outcome space is a logical organizing of categories of descriptions that "represents both the phenomenon as well as the various ways in which it can be experienced" (Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012, 106). It must be designed in a logical and hierarchical manner, inclusive of all categories, however it does not necessarily have to be a linear hierarchy (Åkerlind, 2005, 329; Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012, 106).

In my analysis, I first marked descriptive codes on each interview, based on the content discussed. I then looked at the notes within each category, and synthesized categories based on their relationship to each other, to the whole pool of meaning, and to the research questions. I repeated this process twice, before settling on five categories. Finally, I created a visual representation of my findings, which Marton refers to as the "outcome space" (Marton, 1997, 95). This can be found in the Findings section. Design of the outcome space was also an iterative process, which occurred in conjunction with the final stages of synthesis, and it influenced the naming and visual representation of the categories relationships to each other. Overall, the research process is represented in Figure 2.

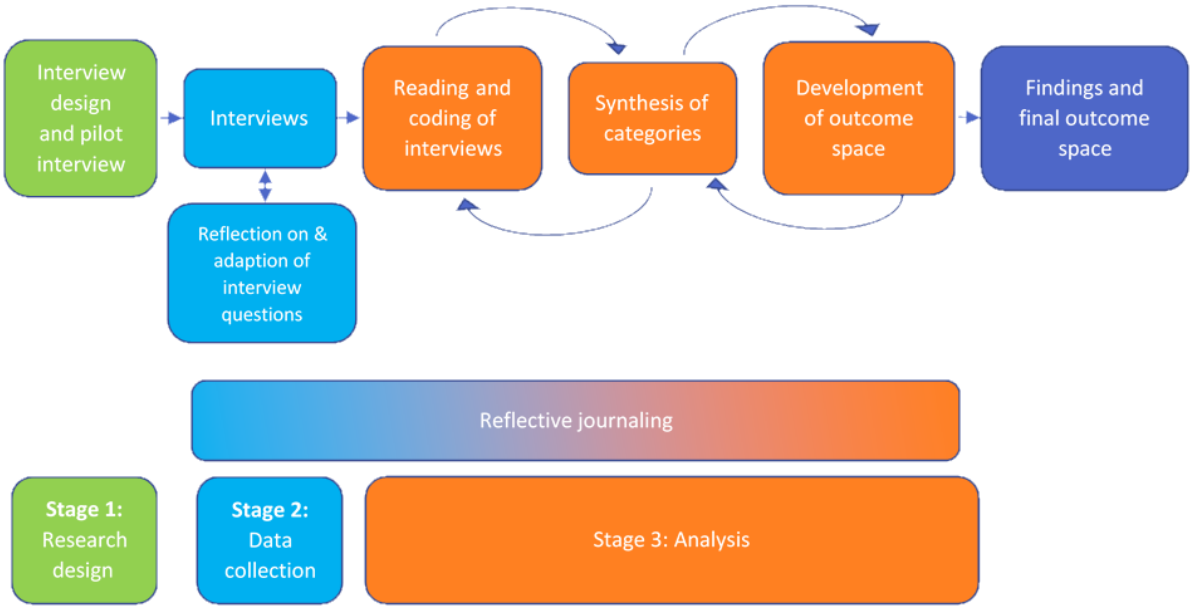

Figure 2. The research process

4.6 Validity and trustworthiness of the study

In this section, I will review the validity and trustworthiness of the research. Compared to quantitative research, the concepts of validity and trustworthiness are less clear cut in qualitative research, with some researchers arguing that they are not even relevant (Golafshani, 2003, 600-602). I believe, however, that these concepts are key in holding the researcher, myself, accountable in the production of meaningful and useful research.

4.6.1 Validity of the study

In phenomenography, validity can be viewed as the internal consistency of the study, its data and its findings (Sin, 2010, 308). Åkerlind (2005) argues that this can be achieved through communicative validity checks and pragmatic validity checks (330-331). A communicative validity check ensures that the researcher is able to argue persuasively for his or her interpretation of the data (Åkerlind, 2005, 330). This does not mean that there is one correct way to interpret the data, but rather that the interpretation should be defensible.

In my own research, I have made several efforts to ensure that my interpretations of data are valid, beginning with the interviews themselves. During interviews, it is important to encourage

explanation when the participant's meaning is unclear (Sin, 2010, 309). Additionally, the interviewer should allow the participant's to come to their own answers, rather than dominating the conversation or eliciting certain responses (Seidman, 1991, 18). I did my best to ask non-guiding questions throughout interviews, and elicited further explanation when I was unclear on the participant's meaning.

Åkerlind (2005) also suggests seeking feedback on interpretations as a communicative validity check (330-331). In one instance, I was afraid I was making too strong of an assumption in my interpretation of a story. I shared that portion of the interview and relevant information with my advisor, while maintaining the privacy of my participant, and through our discussions I came to a justifiable interpretation.

Finally, Åkerlind (2005) argues that research can be valid in its usefulness (331). It is important to ask if the research provides meaningful insight into the topic at hand. From the beginning, I was passionate about writing on the Lao context, as it is an under-researched context. As argued in my introduction, there is a need for more qualitative studies on education in Laos. In this way, any competent research that can contribute to the understanding of education in Laos can provide valuable information to policy makers, education practitioners, and development workers. In my discussion section, I go into further detail on how my findings can be useful.

4.6.2 Trustworthiness of the study

The reliability of phenomenographic research can be viewed as how trustworthy it is. Phenomenography is based on interpretations, meaning that there are no tests of accuracy as are found in quantitative research. Instead, phenomenographers attempt to represent the data as accurately as possible.

The first step in ensuring reliability is to use appropriate methodological procedures (Åkerlind, 2005, 331). To confirm that my methods were appropriate, I reviewed several handbooks on qualitative interviewing, and shared my interview questions with my thesis advisor. Sin (2010) also argues that the researcher must acknowledge and work through their preconceptions, particularly in the analysis process (311). As mentioned multiple times, I routinely reflected on the research process and my own opinions throughout the data collection and analysis stages. This reflexivity mitigated the influence of my own beliefs on my interpretation.

Finally, documentation of the research process allows the reader to make their own judgment on the reliability of the study (Åkerlind, 2005, 332; Sin, 2010, 311). In the preceding sections, I attempted to detail each step of my research, including analysis, as clearly as possible. In this way, I hope I have been transparent.

5 Findings

Through these twelve interviews, it became clear that there *is* a relationship between gender and educational experience, although this was largely discussed as a remnant of the past. The participants' definitions of what it meant to be educated, however, remained generally separate from gender, as the women's personal views of educatedness did not differ between men and women. Finally, international influence clearly played a role in the formation of these perceptions of education, gender, and educatedness due to international aid, gender mainstreaming, and participants' experiences abroad. The question appeared throughout of whether or not gender equality has been reached in modern Laos, with some arguing that it has, and others advocating for more work to be done.

The findings of this research are visibly represented in the outcome space, featured in Figure 3. This figure indicates the relationship between gender and education, of the ways this relationship has developed, and the idea of educatedness. The relationship between education and gender was conceptualized in terms of gender roles and expectations, the influence of families, and women's own resilience and self-determination. The idea of what it means to be educated, or 'educatedness', was conceptualized in two ways: (1) skills and knowledge; and (2) mindset. International experiences and policy had an overarching effect on all conceptions; however, they appeared to have a greater and more direct impact on the idea of educatedness. This is visually represented by the darker blue area surrounding education experiences and concepts within educatedness.

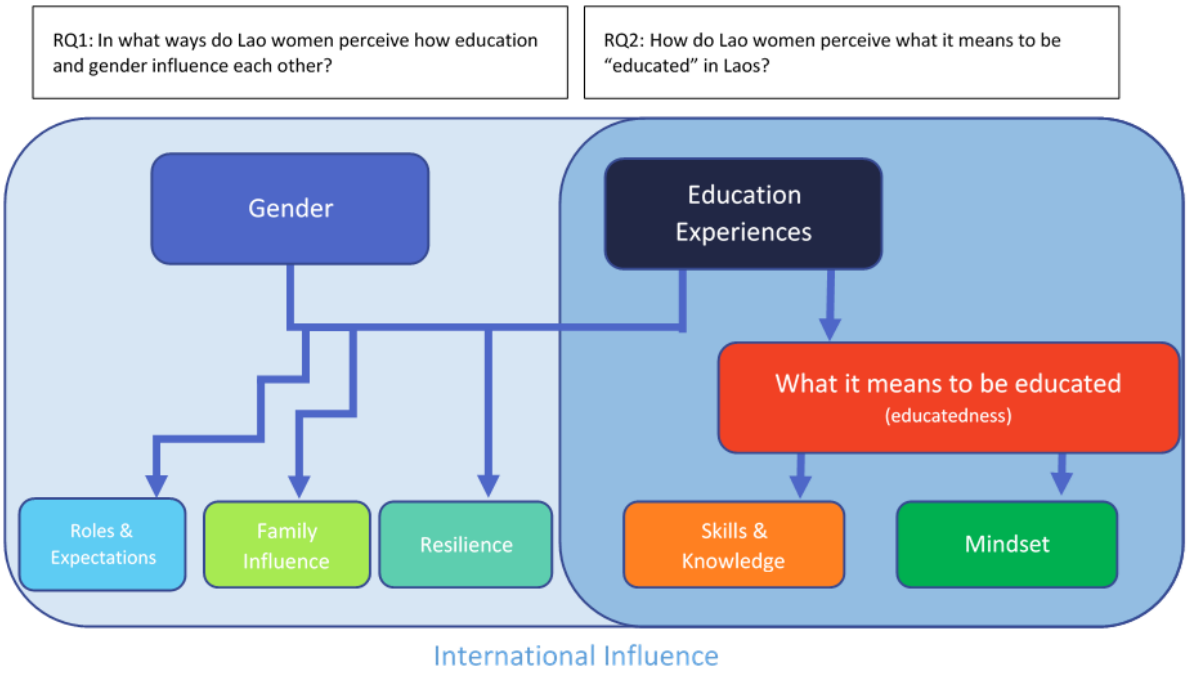

Figure 3. Outcome space.

5.1 Gender's decreasing influence on education

Based on these interviews, gender is no longer viewed as significant a barrier to education as it once was, although there are still issues of equality, particularly in descriptions of life in rural regions. This is impacted by changing gender roles and expectations, family influence (both positive and negative), and women's initiative to take part in learning.

5.1.1 Gender roles and expectations

A repeated theme throughout these interviews was the clear change in gender roles and gender expectations over the past quarter century. Traditionally, women were given lower priority when it came to deciding which children to send to school. Girls were expected to stay home to care for siblings or complete household duties.

> I think the past…I mean about 20 years ago, mostly like the very traditional Lao people at that time, only men can go to the school. Not necessarily just the university, some men should only go to the school and women stay at home taking care of younger brother or sister or whatever. But things start to change. (Mou)

Further, education was seen as a waste on women, who were expected to marry and have children. If women were only to become mothers, there was no need to study in school. Chinda described this as an expectation coming from the head of the family, while Louknum saw it as the reason families may prioritize male education over female.

Alouny shared her own experience of telling her mother she wanted to study:

> When I was young…the older [people], like [my] mother, they said that "You are woman, you…not necessary to study. Because if you get married, you have to take care of the children." But for me, I am stubborn. I don't believe it. I go to school. And my mother, when I was 18 years old, and my mother [said], "You have to get married! Someone is interested! You have to get married!" No. I don't believe it. I went from the family. (Alouny)

As the oldest participant and the participant originally from the furthest province, Alouny's experiences differed from those of the other participants. She entered education in the decade following the end of the civil war, before the influx of Western aid and the promotion of gender mainstreaming projects, and her opportunities to participate in education were much more limited compared to those raised in cities who attended secondary and higher education in the 2000s. Her example as an exception to the norm, fighting to attend school, illustrates how much gendered expectations have changed in the past decades.

These expectations are no longer as strict as before, and women are given more opportunities to participate in education and working life. The roles of women as mother and homemaker have changed, and several participants mentioned that household duties are becoming more balanced, even after marriage. Two participants from outside Vientiane both described examples of men taking on more household and childcare duties at home. Although many of my findings echo the results of Bäcktorp's (2007) research, this is a key difference, as her participants described inequality as still present within family life. This may be indicative of the changing role of both men and women in society and in the household. Maly, an educator from the capital, cautioned, however, that while perceptions are changing, these expectations do still exist. Vilayvanh also explained that women who work still have duties at home, such as cleaning up after their husbands, but lauded women for being able to manage 'everything".

Several of the participants described traditional expectations for Lao women. A good woman was quiet and deferential; they were seen as less capable. Women should listen instead of speak, and women certainly should not complain.

> Don't show anything, you have to be quiet. If you be quiet, you are lovely. We teach about this and the belief [that being] quiet is very good [for] women. So the women, … they cannot show ideas. (Alouny).

One participant, Louknum, commented that although she believes men and women are equally capable, others may still hold on to views that men are superior to women. She found that men may not respect women who have a lot of education. Similarly, another participant noted frustration with the view that men and women are not equally capable, giving the example that men will criticize women even for things a simple as driving a car. She argued that women work very hard at home and in their professional lives, and this is not always recognized. While these women viewed themselves and other women as equally contributing members of society, they recognized that this is not a universally held belief, particularly among men.

Several participants remarked that this view is slowly dying out, as women are given more voice and more chances to participate in society, possibly as a result of their educated status or their professional positions. Py found that her position representing a major international NGO afforded her respect in meetings. The opportunities for women are increasing through scholarships, and people are more open to living in a more gender equal society. Furthermore, women are seen more in positions of power, such as the national assembly, and in typically male dominated fields, like forestry, plumbing, electronics, and automotive. One participant saw this increased representation, and her own success, as a sign that equality has been achieved in Laos:

> Your question is very good, ask me how to compare between men and women. And I say no. I already passed every difficulty. (Vilayvanh)

This reiterates Bäcktorp's (2007) finding that some education officials did not see education as a problem, as modern women were given more opportunities and more promotions through development cooperation (191). Chinda critiqued this view, saying that women who argued this point were "satisfied with what they have already". Generally, participants encouraged continued efforts to increase women's participation.

Traditional views of male and female roles have not completely disappeared, as one participant noted that there are still gendered expectations on what is acceptable to study. She explained this was not something explicitly stated or discussed, but rather a feeling of how things should be.

Another participant, Mou, while praising women's increasing participation in male dominated fields, indicated that woman are able to work in "male" fields. Her descriptions, however, reflect still a separation between what is acceptable work for men and women, even as she is describing their opportunities and standings as equal:

> Now some of the female are enrolled in [automotive studies]. It's not necessary that they're going to be the one who fix the car or motorbike at the end. But after they graduate they can work in the show room. So they can be in sales, like the sales person who can explain about the specification of the engine of the car. (Mou)

Her description seems to indicate that women may still face limitations in the transition from education to working life. It appears that some roles, in this case technical and mechanical, may be considered more appropriate for men.

One of the most repeated themes when discussing gender roles and expectations, however, was that change was not happening uniformly throughout Laos. The "local" areas – i.e. rural and typically ethnic minority – still hold on (or are perceived to hold on) to more traditional gender roles. Several described it as retaining the culture of the past. Girls are expected to contribute either to household duties, or by going to work in the city to raise money. In most cases, the participants described inequality as happening elsewhere and to other people, as opposed to a reality they themselves, as women in cities, lived.

Maly described seeing this difference in her own family, with her cousins living in more rural parts of the country. She explained that the men were able to study, while women were expected to stay at home. Maly said this was a part of their culture, and something that her cousins do not see as a problem:

> They're not upset. They know that, 'okay, it's my responsibility to care of family.' (Maly).

Mou compared the changes she has witnessed in the city to the countryside, stating that women in the cities had equal chances to participate, and saw more value in education.

> Things start to change. Especially people in the city center. But in the rural area, even now, not all the women get a chance to study. Even in 2019. But in the city center, like in…not in the rural area, people perceive education in a better view. So they encourage both men and women to get equal right to go to school. (Mou)

Most participants did not explain why they thought this difference existed, and seemed wary to make generalizations about communities they were not a part of. Thipaphone pointed out that expense may be a barrier to education for both genders, while Chinda commented that those in rural villages may not be aware of the opportunities available to them:

> They don't know their options, their rights. The right is really important. Their right, their right to know, their right to study. Their right to do things. They just think, oh… They just listen to their parents. (Chinda)

5.1.2 Family Influence

Family played a major part of most of these women's educational experiences. Several factors seemed significant in the way families made decisions about their children's education as well as the women's experiences in pursuing education, including socioeconomic status, geographic context, and the time period the women were in school. The majority of the women came from educated families, several with mothers who had worked as teachers. They mentioned that their parents encouraged them to study, and put pressure on them to succeed, in sharp contrast to the experiences of Alouny, who was encouraged to stay in her village to get married. In her situation, she strived for further education in spite of family pressure.

Sousida, Mou, and Noy all had mothers who had worked as teachers, and described their mothers as holding higher expectations for them because of it. Their mothers were available to assist them with their schoolwork, or to push them when they felt lazy.

While most participants specifically mentioned their mothers, Py talked at length about the role her father played in her education. He supported her in her studies, enrolled her in extra courses, and encouraged her to study abroad as he considered education systems overseas were superior to the quality of Lao education.

While familial support was a significant part of the participants' educational experiences, many also discussed the importance of children giving back to their families. Family obligations are an important part of Lao culture. It is expected that children will care for their parents and siblings, and this can be both a barrier and a catalyst to pursuing education. Thipaphone described her reasons for studying agriculture, a field she now loves, as a way to help her family improve their farm. In two cases, participants described stories of women leaving school early to support their families. Khouan described her mother's experience:

> My mom, she is the oldest sister in twelve brother and sister. And then way back [in the past], the family needs a lot of kids because they need to help with farming, with field, with whatever. And because my mom is the oldest one, she and her sister, they had to sacrifice their education…my mom finish … only junior high. And then she had to quit the school and then get opportunity for her brother to study in Thailand or to go study abroad. And then she worked with her younger sister to take care of the whole family. (Khouan)

Vilayvanh, who grew up in a northern province, described her sister dropping out of school to support her and her siblings moving to Vientiane to study:

> So we study in Vientiane, four people. And the other sister, my [oldest] sister she cannot finish study because she has to help my parents to make money and send us to school. She finish only primary school, year 5. (Vilayvanh)

These two stories are representative of the 'traditional' and 'old' way of thinking that many of the participants discussed. The fact these stories, particularly Khouan's mother's story, are from twenty or more years ago is important to note. Although the practice of keeping older children at home may be less common today in Laos, Khouan noted it is still a reality for some, as girls may be required to raise money for their families to send their siblings to school. While these can be viewed as stories from the past, they are still a reality for families without the financial means to support their children's education.

5.1.3 Women's Resilience

The final dynamic at play in this intersection is the role women themselves took in taking charge of their education. Many of the women described their own desire to study and challenges they overcame to reach their goals, but also touched on what they had seen among their families, friends, and in society around them.

Louknum explained that, although her parents encouraged her to participate in education, they had expected her only to complete high school. Her motivation to continue came from within. Another participant, Alouny talked about her persistence in pursuing higher education, despite the difficulties she faced and her family's expectations:

> I went from the family and I stayed [in the city] to work. And every day I try to find the way. How can I study: How can I study higher? And in my life, when I get the bachelor's degree, [I

> ask] why I go back to my home town? Because I think if I go back to my home town, I won't have opportunities to study higher. So I find how I can stay in the city. (Alouny)

Khouan shared the story of her mother, who—as previously mentioned—had to leave school early to support her siblings:

> My mom, when she was about like 55 … they open a nighttime school. So she and my auntie in law and some of our relatives – they are about 50 something already. Three of them went to nighttime school. They just want to finish their…she learned for her bachelor's degree. And she completed. … She doesn't have the opportunity before, but then she completed [it]. (Khouan)

The educational journeys of Alouny and Khouan's mother, which began decades ago, emphasize the significance of the woman's own initiative in their learning. They grew up in the 'past' that many of the participants refer to, where women were viewed mainly as caretakers and were not encouraged to study. The concept of resilience is seen in both of these cases, as Alouny pushed back against her family's wishes by moving to Vientiane and financing her studies on her own, while Khouan's mother continued her educational journey when the opportunity arose decades after initially leaving school.

Several participants commented on the growing desire of women to take part in education, and all aspects of life, as equals. This was not described as a coordinated movement, but rather as women growing tired of their role in society and pushing themselves forward. After discussing the many opportunities available to women through scholarships, Noy made sure to point out that these societal changes were not only due to programming and policy:

> It's better than before… It's not only because of the gender programs, but because of women. They try to improve themselves. To be better. To be good women, and to get more chance to study overseas. (Noy)

Sousida talked about this change in terms of strength and power:

> Women before, they're very quiet. Not speak up. Not go out. Maybe have less friends. … But now everything is changed. Like, women become bigger. Yeah, I think women are more powerful. And then they feel like, independent. (Sousida)

Thipaphone, who has a young child, used herself as an example of woman wanting to work for themselves and have a position outside of the home. She wanted to earn money on her own, rather than follow traditional expectations that she stay at home to care for her child.

Participants noted that this change was not happening collectively throughout Laos, and that perhaps some women are still holding on to older views. Noy used the word "shy" to describe women, especially those in more remote areas, who were not yet ready to change gender roles.

In particular, Chinda, who has participated in workshops on feminism, has noticed this. She noted that while some women are fighting for change and equality, others still want to follow more traditional cultural roles. She compared these women to her own past self:

> They are not aware. You know why? Because they just, they were just like me. Ten or fifteen years ago. I'm here in Laos, a peaceful country. We don't want any challenges. You don't want to learn, you don't want to see. We're just happy with what we have. (Chinda)

Finally, a reciprocal relationship between motivation and education was noted, as several mentioned that education can act as a tool of empowerment, building up confidence and enabling women to find their voice. Py mentioned scholarships in particular as helping women gain confidence.

Malisa was a strong proponent of education for empowerment. She sees education as a way for women to improve themselves and to improve their communities, as it can instigate an internal change. She noted that, before studying, she was shy and willing to follow what was expected of her:

> But after that, no. I know the rights. That women should speak out. We…need women's voices. (Malisa)

5.2 'Educatedness' in Laos

The results of these interviews echoed Pastol's argument that education is not one easily defined list of qualities. Rather, it emerged as a balance of knowledge and skills – not necessarily gained through formal education – and an open mindset and attitude.

Most of the women did not touch on gender in their discussions of educatedness, implying they see it as unrelated to their definitions. Rather, men and women should be held to the same

standards. Louknum explicitly mentioned her belief that being educated has nothing to do with gender:

> Like either you are a man or woman, if you are educated, you also have the same level. We have the equipment to share. We can do the work together. (Louknum)

5.2.1 Skills and Knowledge

Most of the women mentioned that being educated *does* require having skills and knowledge related to your field. It was emphasized that knowing the theory and holding a degree is not enough, but rather, an educated person must deeply understand their field and know how to apply their knowledge in real life situations. This does not mean that the women saw no value in a degree or certification. Instead, education level is just one way to signify educatedness. Mou argued that education level was valued, but the level of education needed to be 'educated' might depend on your background, highlighting the vast disparity in education across Laos:

> In general, for the other people, like educated people…mostly people you perceive like, okay you got to the university or you get the bachelor's degree or even higher… But some people, they also thinking of educated people is something like you can read and write. At the basic, like basic education level. (Mou)

Further, some women argued that formal education wasn't a necessity at all. Vilayvanh argued that educatedness does not have to come from traditional academia, but can be found in all parts of society:

> You know maeban? Housekeeper. Some maeban may not be educated, may not study. But they also learn from their experience. That also means they are educated person... The educated person is not only graduated from the university. (Vilayvanh)

Vilayvanh and others contended that education in Laos should include more practical learning experiences, so young people can gain more skills and experience beyond a classroom. Some participants criticized school and internship programs as too focused on theory and not on preparing students for reality after graduation.

Khouan discussed the need for more practical skills in relation to teachers, in this example teachers at vocational schools:

> So if you have only theory, you read from the book: you never experience how hard it is to stand for eight or ten hours. How hard it is when you cry inside when you have to smile. To please your customer. So that, I think they cannot just read from the book. (Khouan)

5.2.2 Mindset & Attitude

Another definition of educatedness that emerged through these discussions was an even less tangible quality, often described as a 'mindset', 'attitude', or 'way of thinking'. This mindset requires being able to understand the world around you and being open to new ideas and cultures.

Chinda reaffirmed the need for deep understanding, pointing out that just being taught something is not enough. She also argued that this definition of being educated should be the same globally, rather than dependent on the country. For Khouan, being educated meant actively opening up to the world around you. It requires being able to understand your surroundings and the people you interact with. Specifically, she mentioned being open-minded to differences between people.

Critical thinking was also a part of this mindset, and was viewed as something that could help improve society. Several participants criticized the lack of critical thinking in classrooms, relating it's persistence in schools as an indicator of the culture of respect in Laos:

> But, you know, here in Laos, we have we have…how do we say… its cultural context that, you know, cover our mind to think. We never think out of the box. We just think, okay, this is what our parents taught us and we have to follow, like we was trained to be polite. … And that's why, I think its influence of culture that we can't think of something new. So I think it's better for us to go abroad and see something different, think different. (Chinda)

Noy and Py both gave similar explanations, relating it to the culture of respect in Laos. Noy explained that students should have more opportunities to do group activities and learn outside the classroom, so they could become more confident in sharing their ideas and speaking out. In these examples, the influence of international educational experiences was clear. These women had participated in a completely different learning environment that reshaped their values in a way that contrasted with the experiences of most Lao people.

While there have been efforts to promote student centered learning in Laos for several years, Alouny, who works in education, described these attempts as unsuccessful. She explained that

students require a lot of encouragement to ask questions and share their ideas, as this style of learning was completely different from the majority of Lao classrooms.

5.3 International Influence

Finally, it's important to note the influence of international aid and international experiences on the formation of these conceptions. As mentioned previously, most of these women studied abroad, and many worked in international fields or traveled frequently. For some, study abroad was seen as offering a higher quality education compared to what was available in Laos. Many participants described their study abroad experience as extremely different from Lao education, notably due to the support given by teachers and more student-centered coursework.

Several participants specifically mentioned that their international experiences changed their views and helped form the mindset mentioned in the previous section. Khouan, who has studied in two Western countries, stated that her international experiences changed the way she viewed the world, and her ideas on education. Chinda, who participated in a program in Europe, saw education as a way to become exposed to new ideas and new ways of thinking:

> I think its [the] influence of [Lao] culture that we can't think of something new. So I think it's better for us to go abroad and see something different, think different. (Chinda)

Several participants noted that their international experiences influenced their views on gender. Alouny's experiences overseas opened her eyes to the lack of attention given to gender issues in Laos. She noted that gender may be mentioned in policy, but not as often in practice. Malisa, who also has studied in multiple overseas programs, discussed the changes she saw in herself and in her views on gender:

> It's totally changed my thinking. I think more critically, and also changed my—some people said it changed my behavior as well. Because …like before that, I was just shy person. Just keep quiet, and like you should obey and follow men. But after that, no. I know the rights. That women should speak out. We have to… [we] need women's voices. (Malisa)

Additionally, international aid and development programs, particularly scholarships aimed at women, have had a major impact on their views of education and gender. About half of the participants directly praised these efforts as ways of increasing access to education for women,

and several were recipients of this type of scholarship. Noy talked both about gender mainstreaming in projects as well as scholarships available for women to study abroad. She explained that government efforts try to promote a gender balance. Others, who praised these initiatives, still think more progress needs to be made. Similar to Alouny's previous comments, Malisa mentioned that gender equality exists in theory and in government documents, but not in reality.

Some participants were critical of these aid projects. Mou noted that projects driven by outside donors can be a mismatch for the Lao context:

> One of the challenges, we have so many donors to support Laos. In terms of education. Some of the center, they just like … bring the curriculum in and implement from different country. But the thing is, it's for people in that country. Not for the Lao people. Maybe something that people can step back and do, we call it backward curriculum. So it would be more benefit for people, like asking about if it's suitable for the Lao student. Is it applicable for the Lao context? And when the student, if they learn this one, will they be able to work in the labor market in Laos? And the labor market will accept this kind of student or not? It is something that we have to consider. (Mou)

Others were critical of what they viewed as imbalance of opportunities for men and women. In this view, the focus on women's advancement through things like scholarships and quotas has reduced the opportunities for men and created a new gender disparity. Khouan explained that she feels now there are more opportunities for women than for men, and that men are being left out.

6 Discussion

Overall, these interviews indicate that a relationship between gender and educational experiences exists, although views differ on *how* significant that influence is in modern day. The relationship between education and gender is not one-way, however, as education empowers women to push back against traditional gender roles and take part in spheres of society from which they may have been previously excluded. Through education, women in Laos were able to take control of their lives in a way that had not been common ten or twenty years ago. The stories of Alouny and Khouan's mother highlight both these changing expectations, as well as the strength and perseverance of women. This difference between the experiences of older and younger women was also shown in Maxwell et al.'s (2016) study, where senior academics faced different challenges compared to their younger peers (30). As successful stories of women in education become more visible, the opportunities increase for girls and women in the future to participate in education.

The interviews also support previous research done on women in Laos by Bäcktorp (2007) and Faming (2018), marking a distinction between gender equality in urban areas and the perpetuation of traditional roles in rural and ethnic areas. Whether or not participants believed gender equality was fully achieved in cities or is still in progress, it seemed that all agreed that life in the countryside continued to hold on to traditional gender roles. These findings bring two key points to light. First, it strengthens previous arguments that education, and higher education specifically, is only an instrument of female empowerment for a limited portion of the population (Jayaweera, 1997a, 246). Second, it draws attention to the division between groups in Laos, whether defined across ethnic, economic or geographic lines. The discussion of life in the 'rural' and 'local' areas as different and stuck in the past reinforces the disadvantaged position of these women. This view was repeated by women in Vientiane and the women from a second city, ten times smaller than the capital. While some may not consider this smaller city a major metropolis, there was still a clear distinction between "us" (urban women) and "them" (rural women). The term 'ethnic' was often used interchangeably with 'rural', further indicating a, perhaps unintentional, othering of and separation from women outside the cities. By relegating this as a problem of 'someone else', it further marginalizes those with already narrow opportunities for education (Bäcktorp, 2007, 193). As access to education has increased in Laos over the past decade, the legal right to attend school is clearly not enough to empower women and girls. This indicates a need for continued support through gender equality programs that address

the multiple limitations to education, especially outside cities. Schools should become places actively and intentionally working to increase the cognitive, psychological, political, and economic power of women (Stromquist, 2003, 23). Programs must also combat the other issues complicating girls' and women's ability to participate in education, such as food insecurity. Perhaps once families are able to support themselves without children having to drop out to work, girls will be able to stay in school longer, regardless of birth-order. Further, this programming must take an intersectional approach, taking into consideration the unique challenges faced by ethnic minorities.

Additionally, gender cannot be seen as only a matter for women. Previous studies of Laos have found that the fight for gender equality is viewed as a 'woman's issue'; a goal that can only be attained through the efforts of women (Bäcktorp, 2007, 192). Women's resilience was a significant part of each participant's stories, but women's effort should not be viewed as the only way to achieve equality. Several of the women explained that some people in Laos continue to believe women are inferior to men. As long as these views still exist, particularly when held by people in positions of power, women's ability to advance in society will remain limited. Efforts to empower women must also work to decrease this idea of male superiority.

Further, the interviews suggest a need to educate Lao youth on their educational opportunities, and to encourage women to participate more in education and in male dominated fields. Again, women and girls in the rural areas were mentioned as less proactive in their pursuit of education, possibly because they are not aware of the benefits provided by continuing their education. Additionally, a more clear understanding of majors and studies would enable students of any gender to select the programs they are most interested in, rather than those that are popular or expected.

The discussions on educatedness explicitly argued for more student-centered learning in Laos. The push for student-centered began in the early 1990s as a part of stipulations to receive financial support from international donors (Chounlamany, 2014, para. 3). It is clear that the mere introduction of student-centered learning is not enough. This pedagogical shift remains a challenge in Lao education due to lack of capacity, unsuitable curriculum, and limited classroom materials (Chounlamany, 2014, para. 6). It is important to continue encouraging the use of student-centered learning and critical thinking in Lao classrooms, and to ensure that any initiatives are designed in partnership with Lao educators and with the Lao context in mind. Currently, the

BEQUAL program is an effort by the Lao government, in conjunction with the Australian government and the EU, to improve educational quality, access, and outcomes. A part of this initiative is the introduction of a student-centered pedagogical approach (BEQUAL, n.d., para. 1). The final evaluation of the BEQUAL NGO Consortium, released in 2019, found that teachers were implementing activities to increases student participation, but a more in depth review of teachers understanding of, use of, and experiences with student-centered pedagogy is needed (BEQUAL, 2019, 38). BEQUAL will begin its second phase in the fall of 2020.

Overall, it is clear that quality of Lao education across all levels must continue to improve. This is signified both by the value placed on overseas education and by the criticisms of gender-based scholarships. If there is a fear that men are left behind, this may be more an indicator of the low quality of higher education in Laos, rather than a criticism of the scholarship schemes themselves. Again, many projects, including BEQUAL, have worked to improve education in Laos, and it will be important to follow the results of these efforts.

This question of "what about the men?" also brings to mind the 'boy crisis' of the Global North. Data indicate that, overall, boys in OECD countries are outperformed by girls academically, and appropriate policy responses have become a widely debated issue (Cappon, 2011, 3). Although these two 'crises' are not the same, they serve as reminders that gender is not a solely female issue. Rather, the intersection of gender and education for males must also be examined.

Finally, the significance ascribed to critical thinking and the "mindset and attitude" of educated people discussed in the findings seem to show that values are changing in Laos. This cultural shift is most likely due to the increasing internationality of economic and academic life in Laos, linking back to the opening of the market with the NEM and the increase of international aid. The growing number of young Lao students in study abroad programs and exposure to different educational systems has a clear impact on the ways Lao people are viewing the world. Previous research by Fox (2003) reinforces this, as she found that those who had studied abroad had "a heightened social and political awareness of gender and citizenship" (406). Access to international experiences may create further divides in society, as these opportunities are typically only available to those from higher income families, those who can benefit from the nayobay system, or those with access to better quality education, making them more competitive applicants for scholarship programs.

6.1 Areas of future research

This research aimed to add to the slowly growing base of literature on education in Laos. While it has shed light on the experiences of twelve women, it has also brought attention to several areas that could, and should, be expanded upon in future research. Although each participant had unique and illuminating experiences, the participant pool was not particularly diverse when considering the population of Laos. It is important to hear the perspectives of women, and men, from different ethnic backgrounds and with differing levels of education. Expanding the research pool would allow for a more clear picture of how gender and education influence each other in Laos, as well as what constraints and catalysts are currently present.

Additionally, this research alluded to what I could call a 'quiet' feminist movement. Laos has not experienced a feminist movement in the Western sense, with large-scale protests and petitions. Rather, it seems change is occurring more in the home, with women pursing education and careers and asking for a more equal balance of household responsibilities. Further research into the development of women's push for equality in Laos would be significant in building an understanding of how and why women's empowerment is happening.

6.2 Ethical issues and limitations

Undertaking this research project required the consideration of several ethical issues and limitations. Measures were taken to ensure the research was completed as ethically as possible.

6.2.1 Outsider perspective

The most apparent issue of this research was the positioning of myself, the researcher. Although I had previously lived in Laos for two years, I am not Lao and will never fully understand the complexities of Lao culture and history. In this context, I will always be the 'outsider' looking in. This had implications both for my interactions with research participants and for my analysis and understanding of the data. Sin (2010) emphasizes the need for reflexivity and the acknowledgement of preconceptions throughout the research process (310). Because of this, I attempted to make my voice and positioning clear through the research process so that both the audience and I are aware of potential biases. I kept a journal and reflected periodically throughout data collection in order to consider how my position might influence the questions I asked and the interpretations I came up with.

Additionally, I attempted to be open to many responses and ideas that might differ from my own views of what it means to be educated. Berger (2015) argues that one positive of working as an 'outsider' is that the respondents begin in an empowered position as they hold the knowledge and experiences that I am studying (227). However, there are many more challenges. I struggled with how to ask questions in a sensitive and appropriate way, particularly when addressing topics that may be considered taboo or uncomfortable. Additionally, while I could relate to the participants in many ways, there were some parts of their lives that I recognize I may never be able to fully understand or connect with.

Finally, while preparing to write my conceptual and contextual framework, I sought out as many Lao authors as possible. As articles by Lao authors are scarce, I also searched for research by authors from other Southeast Asian nations. In this way, I hoped to expand my own understanding of education and gender in the region, as well as challenge some internally held beliefs that I may not have been aware of.

6.2.2 Power relations

All interactions are influenced by visible and invisible power relations; interviews are no exception. Some feminist researchers argue that "the undeniable and inevitable inequities between researchers and those they study make unavoidable a certain level of exploitation in research" (Preissle, 2007, 523). Millen (1997) argues that the analysis of someone's experiences does not necessarily equate to their exploitation, as the research participant is still the owner of their experience (para. 3.4). While the researcher should be aware of their own power, it is also important to recognize that the participants are not powerless (Harrison, 2006, 64). This research is not an attempt to take control or ownership of anyone's experiences, but rather to bring attention to them, and to understand the implications of these experiences on a wider scale.

Research participants can sometimes feel inclined to provide "ideal answers or exaggerated responses to questions" (Apentiik & Parpart, 2006, 37). This can happen because of a desire to attract development projects, or as a way to present a more positive reality; this is particularly likely if the participant believes the researcher has some ability to influence others (Harrison, 2006, 64). Throughout the interviews, it was important for me to build a positive relationship based on trust and equality with the research participants. I tried to make it clear that this was a purely academic project, and each participant appeared to understand this. As several participants had completed a master's thesis previously, I feel this point was understood. I also told

all participants at the beginning of, and often throughout, interviews that there was no specific answers I was looking for, that this was voluntary, and that they were helping me in my own learning. Additionally, reflexivity encouraged me to continually reconsider my questions and phrasing in regards to how they might guide or influence specific answers.

Furthermore, I sought input from the participants as much as possible. Following the advice of Berger (2015) I asked each participant what they thought I should ask in my next interview, and if there was something that they thought I was missing (230). In some cases, this allowed me to recognize when my questions and explanations were unclear. In others, it led me to questions and points of discussion that I had not previously considered.

6.2.3 Language

Language can create issues in the meaning-making process. Interviews were conducted in English, which was not be the first language of the participants. Sin (2010) points out that there is always the potential for a disconnect between what people say and what they mean (308), and I think this is even more likely when communicating in a second (or third) language. In an attempt to counteract this, I encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and asked for clarification and further explanation when confused. Still, I do think language was an issue in some interviews, as it seemed that occasionally participants struggled to find the words to express their thoughts in English.

6.2.4 Privacy, anonymity, and potential harm

Finally, there are questions of privacy, anonymity, and potential harm to the participants. As gender can be a difficult subject to discuss, it is important to consider the potential impact of these interviews on the research participants. The potential risk could range "from blows to self-esteem or 'looking bad'…to loss of funding for a program, on up to being sued or arrested" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, 292). Additionally, the capital city of Vientiane can be considered a small community, where it can seem everyone knows everyone. Because of this, I wanted to ensure that my participants' identities were protected as much as possible.

Pseudonyms were used and identifying information (ex. Place of work, educational history) was removed or changed for the privacy of all participants. The identity of participants was kept in digital folders only accessible to me on one password protected laptop.

Before interviews, participants were reminded of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the project. Participants were also given a copy of the informed consent form to keep for themselves. This form outlined the purpose and method of the research, the confidential nature of interviews, and the right to withdraw at any point. This form is included in Appendix 5.

Additionally, the participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the interview at any point. They were also sent a copy of the transcribed interview and had the option to retract any part they did not want used in the study within a given period. No participants opted to change or restrict the transcriptions of their interviews.

6.3 Evaluation of the research process

This research began with the intention of highlighting the successes and the gaps in Lao education, and many stories, experiences, and perceptions were collected. In my opinion, phenomenography was the best methodology for this research, as it allowed me to gather a wider collection of data. While I feel I have completed this research to the best of my ability, this project has several limitations that prevented the development of a more thorough understanding of women's educational experiences in Laos.

First, my choice of research participants was quite limited. Of course, having more participants would have added to the depth of my research, but it would not have been feasible for me to collect more data in my limited time in Laos, and data analysis would have been more difficult. Additionally, the fact interviews had to be conducted in the English language limited *who* I was able to interview. This meant my participant group likely overrepresented people from higher socioeconomic statuses, as the poor in Laos are less likely to speak English. It is important to note, however, that those in poverty are also less likely to reach higher education, so the pool of potential participants was already limited. Additionally, my participants were all ethnically Lao, meaning my research lacked the perspective of any of the many ethnic minority groups in Laos. A more diverse participant group would have certainly been beneficial, but unfortunately was not practical due to the lack of time and language skills.

As stated previously, overall I do believe this research brings to light interesting and significant findings in regards to the interplay between education and gender in a context that has largely been ignored in academic writing.

6.4 Conclusion

The progress made on gender issues in Laos over the past few decades has been remarkable. Women are represented increasingly in all aspects of life. Many are aware of their rights, and fight to take advantage of every opportunity available to them. This progress cannot and should not be ignored, but this research reinforces the need for more nuanced understandings of gender issues in Laos. While gender mainstreaming may be present in government policy, several participants noted that is not always reflected in reality. The ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity of Laos requires complex responses to each complex challenge. Additionally, gender issues in Laos cannot be addressed in isolation. Financial and nutritional security continue to play a major role in limiting women's ability to participate in education, especially in rural regions. Further, efforts to improve quality of education must continue.

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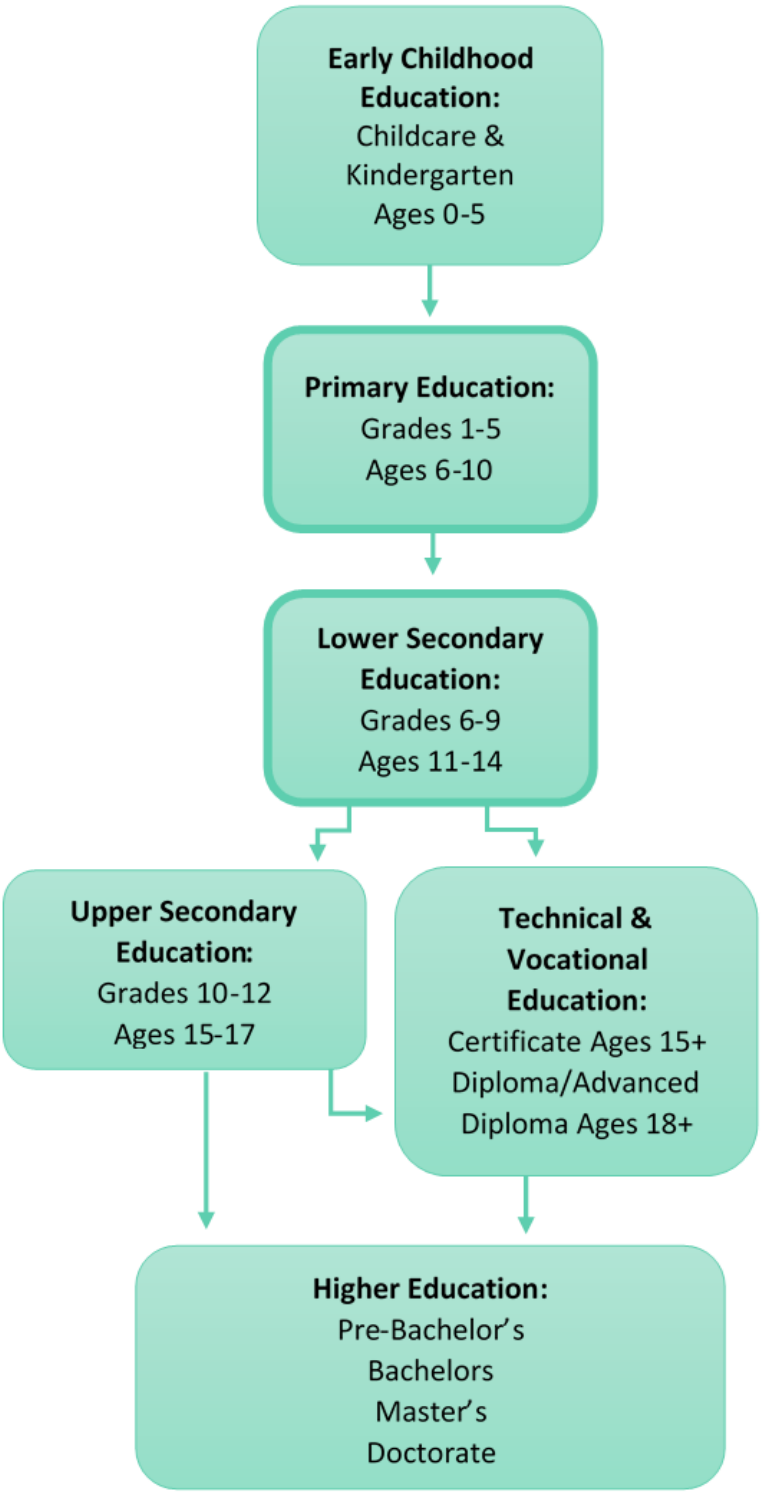
Appendix 1 Lao Education System



Structure of the Lao education system. Primary and lower secondary education are compulsory. (The World Bank, 2016; Government of Lao, 2015)

Appendix 2 Interview Guide

1. Intro and explanation of research and privacy/anonymity
    a. Will be more like a conversation: tell and share as much as you want
2. Educational background
    a. What has your education journey been like? What was your education process?
    b. What was XXX like? (university, study abroad, primary school)
    c. Was there a particular educational experience that is significant to you?
    d. What were some positive or negatives of your education?
3. Concept of being educated
    a. What does it mean to you to be educated?
    b. How has education affected your life? Your career?
    c. How do you think your life would be different if you were not educated?
    d. Why is it important for you to be educated?
4. 'Educatedness' and gender
    a. What does it mean to be an educated *woman*?
    b. What educational expectations do you believe there are for women?
    c. Do you think there are different expectations for men and women?
    d. How are things different for woman than in the past?
    e. Did you face any challenges being a woman?
    f. Has gender affected your work life? Was it equally easy to find a job?
    g. Question on aid/foreign influence (if it comes up)
5. Suggestions?
    a. What could be better?
    b. What should be done?
    c. What is done well?
6. Is there anything else you want to add? Is there anything you think I should ask for my next interviews?
7. Wrap up (thank you, reminder of next steps [sharing transcript, can withdraw])

Bolded questions were added later, at the suggestion of interview participants.

Appendix 3 Participant list

Participant	Age range	Education	Notes
Mou	30s	Bachelors in Laos	Studied abroad*
Maly	30s	Bachelors in Laos	Studied abroad
Louknum	20s	Vocational degree in Laos	Studied abroad
Alouny	50s	Multiple degrees in Laos, higher degree overseas	
Khouan	40s	Bachelors in Laos, multiple degrees abroad	
Vilayvanh	40s	Bachelors in Laos	
Py	20s	Degree overseas	
Thipaphone	30s	Bachelors in Laos	outside Vientiane
Noy	30s	Bachelors and masters overseas	outside Vientiane
Chinda	30s	Degree in Laos, higher degree overseas	outside Vientiane
Sousida	30s	Degree in Laos	outside Vientiane Studied abroad
Malisa	30s	Multiple degrees in Laos, degree abroad	outside Vientiane

*Studied abroad can mean for a short program, a full degree, a language program, or a non-degree program in a country other than Laos

Appendix 4 Interview Summary and Reflection

Site: _____
Date: _____
Participant: _____

Interview Summary Form

1. What were the main issues or themes that struck you in this interview?

2. Summarize the information you got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions you had for this interview.

Question	Information

3. Anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating, or important in this interview?

4. What new (or remaining) target questions do you have in considering the next interview?

Appendix 5 Interview Consent Form

Informed consent for participating in research

This informed consent form provides you as a research participant general information about the research, its purpose and your rights as a participant.

Researcher: My name is Claire Shaw and I am a full-time Master's programme student in Education and Globalisation at the Faculty of Education, University of Oulu, Finland.

Research: I am conducting research on the conceptions of what it means to be a highly educated woman in Laos and on the experiences of highly educated women. The purpose of my research is to identify trends in the experiences and understanding of education for women in Laos. This study is a phenomenographic inquiry.

Confidentiality: If you consent to participate in this research, your feedback, opinions, thoughts, etc. as well as your professional and personal details, will be handled anonymously. The data collected will be used in the published master's thesis and potentially in future publications on the subject. The information that you provide may be linked to a random reference name or pseudonym. A recording of the interview, without your name, will be kept in a secure and private folder until the completion of the research process. Once the research process is complete, the recordings will be destroyed.

Choice: Please do not feel under any obligation or expectation to participate in this research. Also, please be aware that you have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. Observe that information collected before your withdrawal may be used. You have the right to get information about the research and may contact me, if you have questions.

Contact: If you have any questions or concerns in relation to this research, please contact me at cmeilingshaw@gmail.com or on WhatsApp at +[redacted]

Agreement: I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Claire Shaw, Master's student at the Faculty of Education, University of Oulu, Finland. I understand that the research is designed to collect information in relation to perceptions, experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings related to the topic of education in Laos.

I understand that I will be one of several participating in this research. My participation in this research project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no other participate will be informed. I have the right to decline to answer any questions.

I understand that the researchers will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this research will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained to me and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time.

Date ___/___ 20___

_____
Signature and name (in capital letters)

Researcher

_____
Signature
Claire Shaw, cmeilingshaw@gmail.com, +[redacted]